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Title of PhD Thesis: State and Human Rights in Saudi Arabia

Abstract

The desert Kingdom Saudi Arabia, rich in oil but poor in water, is the largest country in the West Asia by land area, constitutes four-fifths of the Arabian Peninsula, and the second largest State in the Arab World after Algeria. The strategic position of the country gives the Kingdom great leverage. Saudi Arabia is one of the last functioning absolute monarchies and the only State in the world whose name is after the name of a man ‘Abdul Aziz al-Saud’ (Ibn Saud). The State’s religion is Islam but it follows the so called puritan strand of Sunni Islam ‘Salafism’ or ‘Wahhabism’. Saudi Arabia is considered to be particularly devout because the religion Islam was born here and the presence of two most important holy sites (the Kaaba in Mecca and the tomb of Prophet Muhammad in Medina) of Islam.

Saudi State has been the centre of attraction for many academicians and organizations for its human rights records. Accepted as dynamic and famous norm of today, human rights has acquired a wide recognition in an international arena, they have been controversial and contentious term in the contemporary discourses. As concept of human rights evolved over time, Saudi Arabia has also emphasized different notion of human rights. In Saudi Arabia, the civil society and government of Saudi Arabia is currently debating the nature, contour, thrust and scope of human rights in its own way, which I would say Saudi’s interpretation of human rights. In recent times these debates have been largely conducted within the discursive framework of universalism and cultural relativism. Interesting thing is that, along with the firm side of cultural arguments, the Kingdom is ratifying international conventions also. Nevertheless, the implementation of existing laws concerning to human rights in any country always has its own kind of specific hurdles and barriers ranging from religion, tradition, culture to political and social set up.

This research investigates the relationship between State and human rights in Saudi Arabia. In this study, the researcher has made an attempt to explore the extent, contours and nature of human rights in the absolute, monarchical State Saudi Arabia.

Central to this study has been the examination of the perceptions of Saudi State, ulama as well as different sections of diverse Saudi society regarding human rights. This thesis has explored different dimensions of the following questions: what universality of human rights means to different sections of the Saudi society? How cultural relativism paradigm of human rights is being constructed? What is the progress and direction of universalists vs. relativists debate of human rights? What are the emerging paradigms out of the multiple prevailing paradigms of human rights?

The thesis also attempts to evaluate the effects of different State's policies including legal, civil, political and socio-economic that intends to improve the human rights situation in the Kingdom. The study also seeks to do an in-depth investigation of the extent to which Saudi State have responded to internal as well as external pressures for more far reaching reforms. This research has also examined how the Saudi State has balanced citizen's demands of human rights, ulama's resistance in the status quo, and external pressures to concede to universalism. Is the efforts of the State sustainable, and what are the possibilities once this balance is lost, have been the prime focus of this study.

The present study seeks to understand different ideological positions, governing mechanisms, trends and perspectives on the issue of human rights in Saudi Arabia. Doing case study on Saudi Arabia was the best opportunity for me to understand the debate between universalism and cultural relativism which is crucial for understanding the various perspectives of human rights. This study after analyzing the interplay among different paradigms of human rights within the frameworks of universalism and cultural relativism and their relationship with different sections of Saudi society finds that the current situation of human rights in the country is not satisfactory due to the absence of a unique and unanimously accepted paradigm of human rights in the country. The thesis suggests various ways based on this study for achieving the same.